Developing a Plan for Collaboration:
Bringing Educators and Parents of 2e Students Together

By Susan Baum, PhD, and Robin Schader, PhD

Some time ago, the two of us began to compare notes about twice-exceptional (2e) students – children who exhibit remarkable gifts and talents in specific areas but simultaneously experience deficits and difficulties in learning, attending, or meeting social and emotional expectations. Our combined professional and personal experience with these students prompted us to address the problems of identifying them and the challenges of developing programming for them.

As we talked, we were struck by how often one particular issue surfaced – the persistent absence of clear communication between home and school. Unfortunately, the two major groups of adults in a position to provide the best possible learning opportunities for these children – educators and parents – rarely collaborate in discussing and designing appropriate plans. Why doesn't it happen?

We speculated that the answer might stem, at least in part, from the distinct responsibilities of each group. Although both share a common goal of helping children succeed, they each have their own focus, exclusively directed at the issue(s) of concern within the realms of home and school. Concerns like disruptive behavior in the classroom, lack of organization skills, increasing disengagement with school, or a variety of other common concerns can easily be viewed from completely different vantage points and given quite different levels of emphasis. As a result, many potentially productive conversations between educators and parents are derailed (or simply never take place). Instead, the two groups pursue their parallel paths without reaching out to compare notes and without acknowledging the multi-dimensionality of the situation.

Our combined research and field experience have shown that effective communication and shared planning between educators and parents is a powerful combination for positive change. Yet, we are also acutely aware that the swirl of emotions surrounding situations with high stakes and few guarantees makes it hard for both parties to maintain equilibrium when working together. Therefore, we decided to create a format to facilitate collaborative discussions that could serve to untangle and clarify the perplexing behaviors of students who fail to thrive in school.

A Process for Facilitating Collaboration

The result of our work is called the TLC Process, an informal way to draw on input gathered from parents, teachers, and the individual student. The process involves collecting information about the child's strengths and interests, as well as about areas of concern. More importantly, the TLC Process helps each person involved articulate, from his or her perspective, the circumstances in which the student can find success. In discussing the sections of the TLC forms, we'll use an example to illustrate how the process can work.

Putting the TLC Process to Work

Halfway into the school year, Eric's parents were confused, anxious, and highly concerned about their first-grade son's increasingly glaring problems in the classroom. They were also worried about his behavior at home. Eric was clearly showing signs of anxiety, with facial tics and repetitive motions. Most pencils in the house were snapped in half or had the erasers chewed off.

Eric's teacher had met with the parents on several occasions and was recommending further psychological testing. Eric had already been tested numerous times in his young life because he wasn't fitting the norm within the classroom. Originally, he was referred for speech problems. At various times, as he moved from professional to professional and teacher to teacher, it was suggested that he was

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Why Collaborative Planning Between Educators and Parents Matters

The April, 2007, issue of *2e: Twice-Exceptional Newsletter* reported that when teachers were asked what they need most from parents of 2e students to help the students succeed, 69 percent of survey responses included "support by, participation of, and communication with parents." From the parental point of view, less than half of those surveyed felt that their child's current teacher had an understanding of how to effectively address the complex learning needs of twice-exceptional students.

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hyperactive, had attention deficit, had spatial awareness and sensory issues, and/or was unable to read social cues. Now, administrators at Eric's school informed his parents that their young child needed more remediation.

Only one professional, the last, suggested that Eric was gifted. His parents suspected that he might have high abilities because he had taught himself to read prior to the age of five. Eric had also exhibited early artistic abilities and had perfect pitch. When his parents tentatively suggested the possibility of giftedness to school personnel, teachers and administrators acknowledged the boy's academic abilities only within math; however, they stated that this narrow area of achievement was overshadowed by other deficits. Therefore, Eric would not be allowed any enrichment opportunities at school until he could demonstrate sufficient appropriate classroom behavior.

When we were first brought in as consultants, each person involved in Eric's situation was uneasy. The child's accumulated litany of diagnoses and host of symptoms presented a daunting issue for school personnel and parents alike. The dynamic between home and school was severely strained, and Eric was unintentionally caught in

the middle. At this point, we began to explore workable solutions using the TLC Process.

Using the TLC Planning Framework

At the heart of the TLC Process is a planning framework used to clarify concerns in a way that allows all participants a voice and a vision for future steps. While the TLC Planning Framework is most successful when filled out collaboratively, it was designed in a way that would allow either school personnel or parents to initiate the procedure in a non-confrontational manner. In this case, it was Eric's parents who began the process.

In a meeting with the parents, we discussed what prompted them to seek help. Then, using the first column of the form shown below as a guide, we asked for a list of no more than three distinct concerns. After much discussion, Eric's parents proposed the three shown under *Reasons for Plan*.

Eric's parents found it difficult to distill these three concerns from the many they felt they faced. Once they did so, however, the short list helped them find specific areas to focus on rather than

The TLC Planning Framework			
Reason(s) for Plan	**Taking Stock**	**Times of Personal Best**	**Hopes and Dreams** (parent, teacher, child)
Eric is unable to focus in school. Eric shows stress-related symptoms. Eric has problems fitting in socially.	• Decodes at 6th-grade level • Is 3 yrs above grade level in math and spelling • Loves to draw and build with Legos • Has a superb visual memory • Shows preference for non-fiction • Has passion for gourmet cooking • Is drawn to music	**Teacher input:** • Working w/adults one-on-one • Completing challenging math assignments **Parent input:** • Cooking • Discussing non-fiction material • Drawing • Singing in church **Student input:** • Doing science • Cooking • Drawing	• Eric learns something new each day. *– input from Eric* • Eric develops friendships. *– Eric's mother's perspective* • Eric has talent development opportunities. *– from Eric's mother* • Eric learns to stay focused and becomes self-regulated. *– from the teacher* • Eric is happy and stays eager to learn. *– from Eric's father*

The Learning Concern™(TLC) Program: Baum & Schader, 2005

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feeling overwhelmed and discouraged by the enormity of Eric's current school failures.

 The second column in the framework, called *Taking Stock*, is a place to list the child's learning experiences, achievements, and other markers. This column is also the place to record the child's interests and learning preferences. Because it's essential to maintain a holistic view of twice-exceptional learners like Eric, the child's learning history beyond traditional measures, such as tests, report cards, or teacher checklists, should be included here. We use information from instruments such as My Learning-Print (Schader & Zhou, 2003). Information on this instrument is available at www.gifted.uconn.edu.

Eric, as the second column shown here notes, is drawn to music. He has always had a superb visual memory and, once he could draw, would keep notes of where he was and what he was doing through his drawings. When being read to, and when reading by himself, he showed a strong preference for nonfiction, wanting material that would inform him more deeply about his current area of passion. Over the years, he had exhausted information about dinosaurs, trains, and rockets. As a first grader, his decoding skills were at a sixth-grade level, and he was three years above grade level in math and spelling.

The third column, *Times of Personal Best*, asks a simple question – but one rarely voiced within school walls: When is the student at his or her personal best? It's helpful to consider the question with regard to the concerns documented in the first column. In other words, when are the concerns in column 1 *least* likely to be present? Teacher, parent, and student input should be included here.

In Eric's case, the first-grade teacher reported that he was focused and on-task when he was working on challenging math problems and when working one-on-one with adults. His parents saw little evidence of any stress-related symptoms when he was cooking with them, or drawing, or talking about the books he had been reading. Eric, as noted in column three, said he was happiest when he was cooking, doing science, or drawing.

Finally, the last column, *Hopes and Dreams*, lists all parties' short-term expectations for the child – their hopes and dreams within a specific timeframe. This information provides a way to gauge markers of success in terms of the concerns listed in column 1.

In Eric's case, each person responded with a marker

of success by the end of the current school year. As shown in the Framework, Eric's teacher wanted him to stay focused and become self-regulated in the classroom. His father hoped Eric would be a happy child who was still eager to learn. His mother had two wishes. She was quite concerned about Eric's social development and wanted him to make friends. She also wanted him to have opportunities for enrichment within his talent areas. Eric's dream was simple and to the point; he wanted to learn something new each day.

Notice how the discussion about hopes and dreams allows the meeting to conclude on a positive note, with each participant having his or her voice heard. Indeed, stating hopes and dreams for a youngster is identifying outcomes with a clear and positive image of what is possible. Eric's parents and teacher were smiling as they set the date for the next session.

Creating a Working Design

Ending the meeting by looking forward in recognition of individual hopes provides a transition to the next stage of the TLC process, translating a shared vision of possibilities into relevant and thoughtful practice. One week later, when the team reconvened, they made use of another planning tool, the Working Design, shown on the next page. This four-column document serves as a basic guide for writing and implementing a short-term intervention based on the information col-

Specifying Hopes and Dreams

Parents may be reluctant to push for talent development when their child is struggling with the core subjects. However, the basis for an effective plan is the creation of an optimal learning environment (intellectual, emotional, and physical) in which a student can thrive. In such an environment we need to consider talent development opportunities and intellectual challenge along with academic support that includes differentiation in the classroom, accommodations, and remediation. Such plans should be devised using a team approach. Members of the team should include the classroom teacher, learning support specialist, teacher of the gifted and talented, the parent(s), and the child, all acting as partners.

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lected in the Planning Framework. The Working Design, shown below, combines needs with solutions to be field tested over a six- to eight-week period.

The first column, *Grade-level Benchmarks*, invites discussion about the appropriateness of regular classroom curriculum – an issue not generally considered when bright students are underachieving or acting out. In Eric's case, we noted that he was functioning above grade level in all subject areas except reading comprehension, particularly when dealing with fiction. He clearly preferred reading and talking about non-fiction books that pertained to his areas of interest. Acknowledging this information is critical to establishing an appropriate learning environ-

ment – one that does not restrict learning.

The second column of the Working Design form provides a structure for creating the least restrictive environment in terms of intellectual, physical, and social/emotional needs. Too frequently, learning plans fail to address *all three* of these areas simultaneously. Focusing on one area without considering the others compromises the effectiveness of any program.

Because Eric is advanced in most content areas, restricting him to grade-level materials will not encourage intellectual growth. We learned from the Planning Framework that Eric's behavior is much better when he is engaged in more challenging

The TLC Working Design			
Grade-level Benchmarks	**Least Restrictive Learning Environment**	**Talent Development Options**	**Necessary Support**
Is above grade level in all academic areas, with the exception of reading comprehension, especially with fiction	**Intellectual**: • Needs above-grade-level materials and appropriate assignments • Will be accelerated in math using computer software programs in problem solving • Will use science fiction for reading comprehension. **Physical**: • Needs quiet, things to manipulate, and movement • Will have an office in the corner of the room with a laptop, headphones, and manipulatives (Any child can sign up to use the office when they need quiet.) **Emotional**: Needs time with multi-age interest peers (The school is beginning an after-school engineering program. Eric will be invited to join.)	**Cooking:** weekend cooking school (Parents will enroll Eric.) **Drawing:** • Participation in middle school weekly studio art program • Parents to enroll Eric in Exploratorium Museum once-a-month weekend classes in engineering and design	**Parent:** • Resources (travel, time, private lesson funding) • Sensory integration program **School:** • Transportation to middle school (Eric is excused from regular classroom without penalty.) • Advanced math curriculum materials • Literacy specialist for support in reading comprehension • Support for developing social skills with age-mates (counselor in classroom, working in context)

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material. We also know that he has a passion for nonfiction, especially topics involving science. Based on this information, the suggestion is made to use science fiction to help him with his challenges in reading comprehension.

Attention to the physical environment is essential for Eric. His sensory issues demand an environment where distractions are minimized. Having an "office," or quiet area of the room where he can work when necessary, provides Eric with the respite he may need to function and gives him the opportunity to self-regulate his behavior. Allowing other children access to the "office," through use of a sign-up sheet, will ease feelings of alienation or separation by showing Eric that other students, as well, might prefer a quiet space to concentrate

In terms of Eric's social/emotional needs, the Planning Framework revealed concerns about his stress and social disconnectedness. In fact, a hope and dream was that Eric have friends. As all of us understand intuitively, social relationships often occur around common interests, not chronological age. Because a multi-age engineering club was forming as part of an after-school program, this setting offered an opportunity for Eric to interact with other students with similar interests and abilities, no matter their age or grade. All of the options selected for Eric were documented in column 2 of the Working Design, as shown on the opposite page.

Column 3 is notable because of the powerful role talent development plays in the lives of 2e students. It has been shown to be the *most* effective strategy in raising self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-regulation for this special population of students. Talent development is an area where parents can work with the school to provide experiences that nurture their children's talents and interests.

In Eric's case, his parents were willing and financially able to enroll him in cooking classes and a monthly weekend program in engineering and design held at a local museum. The school agreed to have Eric participate in the middle school's weekly studio art program. By this point in the process, the parents and teachers were beginning to contribute suggestions, offer creative ideas, and openly share possible resources as they discussed different options.

Column 4 of the Working Design notes any additional support needed to implement the ideas suggested for talent development, as well as provisions for targeted remediation and attention to deficit areas. In Eric's case, his parents were able to provide specific talent development opportunities. They also agreed to enroll him in a sensory integration program. The school was willing to transport Eric to the middle school art program, and his teacher agreed that Eric would not need to make up missed assignments, nor be penalized for the time he was out of the classroom. In addition, the school gave Eric's teacher advanced curriculum materials to use in offering him higher-level instruction. Finally, the school counselor agreed to be available in the classroom at certain times during the day to help Eric

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The Need for Collaboration in Finding Strength-based Solutions

A comprehensive educational plan for twice-exceptional students must address multiple, complicated issues. Focusing only on deficits, or denying possible problems, greatly compromises the effectiveness of any program for these students.

The barriers to designing a balanced plan are two-fold. First, there may be misinformation and misunderstanding about the needs of the 2e child, which adversely affect identification and programming. Second, when difficulties arise with a child's educational progress, the ensuing process typically becomes very diagnostic and prescriptive. The focus shifts from dealing with the child's needs to finding a label to explain the child's problem. Only when a label has been attached are strategies put in place. Many times the process that results is a formal, rigid, mechanized one whereby parents are given information rather than included in what should be a collaborative decision-making process. It's a process that generally precludes discussion of what is *right* with the child.

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develop appropriate social skills.

The two-month plan created for Eric was evaluated in early January. The outcomes were noted in a section at the bottom of the Working Design form, as shown below.

Eric's stress-related behaviors had diminished substantially. He was not only successfully working on challenging material, his attention within the classroom had increased. He was now willing to explore fiction, and he was showing more awareness of how to interact socially with age peers.

As the small successes began to accumulate, Eric's teacher suggested teaming him with a few other children, also advanced in math, to work on a web quest that applied math concepts. In addition, she asked if the counselor could accompany Eric on the playground during recess for a few days to help him relate in less structured contexts. All agreed to the adjustments and planned to meet again in March to continue the collaboration.

Conclusion

The successes in Eric's story show what can happen when professionals and parents approach concerns about a student with flexibility and work together to combine their knowledge. The tools of the TLC process – the Planning Framework and the Working Design – help to facilitate productive collaboration that can recognize and honor individual strengths, interests, and talents. The positive results are evident to anyone who meets Eric now. He's excited about going to school – especially on those days when he goes to the engineering club and studio art!!!

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The TLC Working Design
Outcomes
• Eric's stress-related behaviors have disappeared.
• He is successfully working on challenging material.
• His willingness to explore appropriate fiction has increased.
• He shows more awareness of how to interact socially with age peers.